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ABSTRACT

The development of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) rating scales (bandscales) for English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) proficiency in school-age children is described, focusing on issues arising in the process. The origins of the larger ESL Development Project, of which the bandscales project was a part, are described and the program's principles are outlined. The bandscales project's objective was to create three rating scales for junior primary, middle/upper primary, and secondary school students to assist teachers in making instructional decisions and in monitoring and reporting progress. Three integrated strategies used in writing the scales are discussed: (1) adoption of a model of language ability able to account for the complexity of variables in the school context; (2) adoption of a three-tiered framework to account for the influences of age, experience, and context on students' second language development; and (3) incorporation of descriptions of second language ability in academic contexts. The process of validating the scales is also described, and issues related to implementation are addressed briefly. Contains 36 references. (MSE)

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2 Developing ESL proficiency descriptions for the school context: The NLLIA[1] ESL Bandscales

Penny McKay

Introduction

The current move in the education world towards the monitoring of learner progress through sets of progressing descriptions of ability, called profiles (e.g. by the Australian Education Council), levels of attainment (e.g. by the South Australian Education Department 1991), and learning outcomes (e.g. by the Northern Territory Department of Education 1992), together with a call from several quarters (e.g. Campbell et al. 1984; Centre for English as a Second Language, University of Western Australia 1991) for proficiency scales in ESL in schools, provided the impetus in 1991 for funding for the NLLIA ESL Development: Language and Literacy in Schools Project[2]. The ESL Development Project's brief was the development of an assessment and reporting package for ESL language development in schools; a major component of this assessment and reporting package was to be a profile, or a set of proficiency descriptions for ESL learning in schools.

The aim of this paper is to describe some of the key issues behind the development of the the ESL Bandscales[3], the profile component of the NLLIA ESL Project. The ESL Bandscales are an integral part of the wider ESL Development Project and for this reason, a brief outline of the full assessment and reporting package developed by the ESL Project is provided.

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The NLLIA ESL Development Project: an integrated ESL assessment package

Purpose of the project

The NLLIA ESL Development Project's brief was stated in broad terms, namely, to work towards providing:

- an increased capacity to measure proficiency development among school students;
- a better understanding of the interrelationship between mother tongue/English as a second language/English language development issues and improved advice to schools about these matters and their impact on English theory;
- an improved capacity to develop an information base to establish needs and policy determination;
- assistance to teachers in maximising effectiveness of instruction for students of non-English speaking background;
- more accurate targeting of resources to ESL and mother tongue teaching and English literacy;
- a basis established for ongoing professional development.

(Extract from NLLIA Project document)

The ESL Development Project materials became a major focus of attention for the ESL field in Australia over almost two years; many educators contributed significantly to the outcomes of the project. Contributors included professional associations, ESL education personnel from each state/territory in Australia who served on a national reference group, a large number of practising ESL specialists and teachers around Australia and consultants in universities in Australia and overseas.

The political and educational influences on the ESL Development Project were strong, with the result that a set of principles was developed out of consultations

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to establish understandings and agreements about the direction of the project (see Figure 1). These principles became a vital reference point for the developmental work of the project, since it was recognised from the outset that the project must operate within the current political and philosophical context of Australian education. The principles are reflected strongly within the materials developed within the ESL Project.

PRINCIPLES INFORMING THE ESL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

1. **The ESL Development Project should address the requirements of the political context.** To do this the ESL Development Project should:

   - undertake wide consultation;
   - work as far as possible towards state and national (AEC CURASS) requirements.

2. **The ESL Development Project should draw on a broad philosophical and research base.** To do this the ESL Development Project should:

   - incorporate theoretical perspectives according to the focus of the materials being developed, that is
   - use the Bachman (1990, forthcoming) model as an informing model for the ESL Bandscales and the assessment exemplars; draw on other models as needed; focus on Second Language Acquisition theory in research into acquisitional sequences;
   - consult the literature, and colleagues widely;
   - hold a colloquium to draw on school ESL research and ESL expertise in Australia.

3. **The ESL Development Project should represent all ESL learners as far as possible, and do so positively and equitably.** To do this the Project should:

   - aim to broadly include, as far as possible, all ESL learner groups;
   - recognise positive starting points for ESL;
   - provide positive descriptions of growth;
   - stress the key role of the L1 in the learning of English;
   - stress individual differences as commonalities are explored.

Figure 1 Principles informing the NLLIA ESL Development Project

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4. **The ESL Development Project should accommodate the realities of and the shared perspectives about ESL teaching and learning in the school ESL field:**

   - recognise and accommodate as far as possible the range of approaches to ESL delivery in the school context;
   - accommodate developmental and contextual changes, together with multiple entry points, K - 12;
   - describe and assist teachers to assess and report on "ESL-ness" in the school context;
   - recognise and cater for the integrated nature of ESL teaching and learning (ESL across the curriculum; language and content; interrelationship of four skills; interrelationship of the curriculum and assessment process) in the school context;
   - aim the materials towards both ESL specialists and mainstream teachers.

5. **The ESL Development Project should recognise the practical constraints of ESL teaching and support in schools.** To do this, the ESL Development Project should:

   - take account of the constraints in the use of the materials (e.g., time, numbers of students, a range of expertise) in the school context;
   - emphasise the need for professional development.

6. **The ESL Development Project should emphasise the need for further research and development in school ESL.** To do this, the ESL Development Project should:

   - promote the Project materials as a contribution to ongoing research and developement in school ESL;
   - encourage further research and development work on the Project materials and in the area of school ESL proficiency assessment and reporting;
   - emphasise the need for professional development activities around the Project materials.

Figure 1 Cont. Principles informing the NLLIA ESL Development Project

Project materials

The final materials developed through the project and published in the NLLIA ESL Development: Language and Literacy Project Report (NLLIA 1993) were as follows:

- Three sets of ESL Bandscales covering junior primary, middle/upper primary and secondary learners in the school context (Volume I of the Report).

- Exemplar assessment activities and observation guides providing tools to teachers (ESL and mainstream teachers) for in-class and within-curriculum observation of language proficiency of ESL learners as they interact and learn in the school context (Volume I of the Report).

- Reporting formats and guidelines for both ongoing recording and for profile reporting of ESL learners' language development, again as they interact and learn in the school context (Volume I of the Report).

- A research report 'An empirical study of children's ESL Development and Rapid Profile' and papers relating to the project work (Volume II of the report).

Together, the components of the project provided an integrated approach to assessment of ESL learners' language in the context of the school. The relationship of the components of the ESL Development Project is set out in Figure 2.

The role of assessment

The central place in the ESL Development Project's assessment and reporting picture belongs to teaching and learning where ESL is taught and learned within the context of, and integrated, with the school curriculum. This positioning restates the well established perspective within school education that the role of assessment is to provide support for, rather than to become the driving force for teaching and learning.

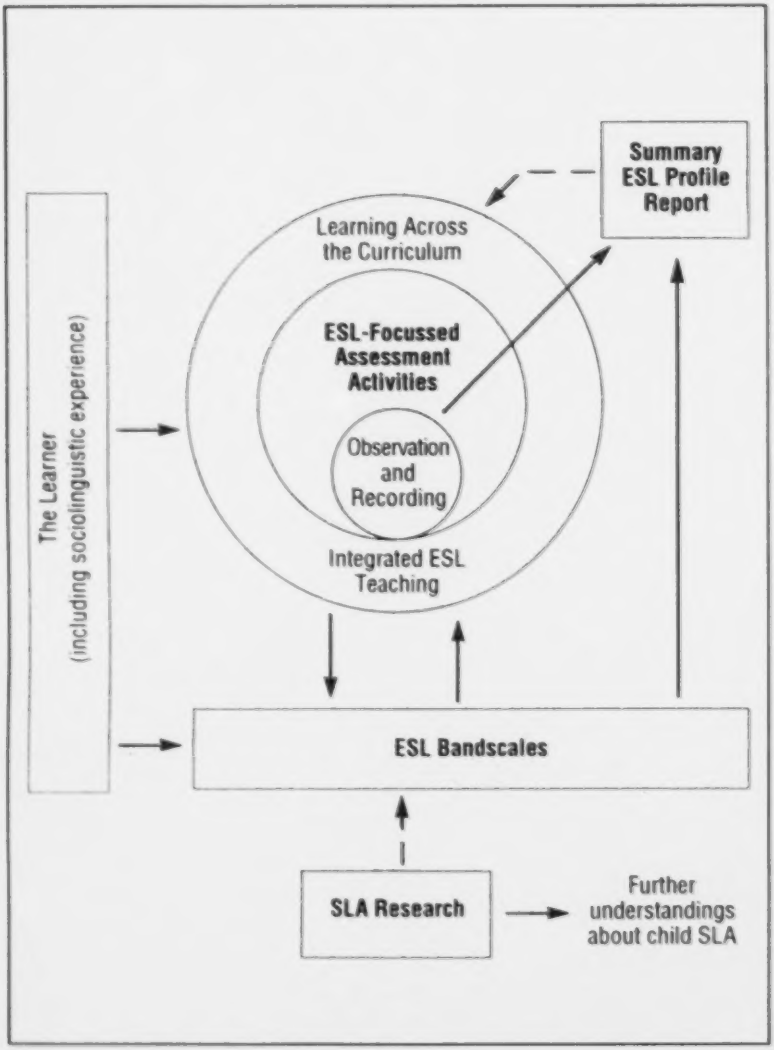

Figure 2 Relationship of components of ESL Development Project

Assessment activities

ESL-focused assessment activities, which are derived out of the planned curriculum but which are also informed by understandings of ESL proficiency development, guide teachers to focus on the various aspects of the language development of their ESL learners within the context of the specific teaching program. The assessment activities, with accompanying observation guides, have been developed in close consultation with teachers, as exemplars to assist teachers to select appropriate assessment activities for their teaching program and their particular learner group. Ongoing recording is central to effective assessment and reporting.

Reporting profile

Guidelines and suggested formats for ongoing recording are provided in the ESL Project Report. A final Summary ESL Report is needed to report to others (other teachers, parents, education bodies) on the progress of the learner. A suggested format for a Summary ESL Profile report, with guidelines for teachers on ways to incorporate the learner's estimated ESL Bandscale levels accompanied by profiled information about the learner's background and performance, are also provided in the Project Report.[4]

The ESL Bandscales

The ESL Bandscales play important roles within this coordinated picture of ESL assessment. The ESL Bandscales will:

- assist teachers of ESL learners to make more informed decisions about their selection of learning activities for ESL learners, and about the kind of language-focused teaching and support individual ESL learners will need, in mainstream and intensive-ESL learning activities;

- provide teachers of ESL learners with a shared reference document as they assess and record ongoing progress of ESL learners, and as they report on learner progress in ESL through the Summary ESL Profile report;

- provide teachers with a common reference point for long-term monitoring of ESL learners' progress from K/entry–12.

Development of the ESL Bandscales

Processes of development

Initially, the processes of development of the ESL Bandscales relied on empirical, psychometric methods (employing Rasch analysis) to determine the nature and relative placement of indicators on a continuum (Griffin and McKay 1992). The initial process was described as bottom-up consultative (Griffin and McKay 1992): practitioners were asked to provide descriptions of tasks and indicators, and then students were to be observed and rated on each of the indicators in order to obtain calibration data (Griffin 1990). There was concern amongst many teachers that the outcomes of these processes lacked validity, in part because learner characteristics (age, maturity, background knowledge etc.) and context (the nature of the task, degree of interlocutor support etc.) were not being adequately addressed when individual indicators were calibrated and grouped through such a statistical process. The project subsequently moved towards developing more integrated and context-related descriptions, following a top-down consultative process: that is, the indicators were written into integrated proficiency level descriptions, with reference to current second language learning and assessment theory; a small group of specialists who were themselves experienced teachers provided initial, draft and final descriptions of language progress, engaging practitioners in an iterative process of dialogue and response as they did so.

Existing proficiency scales

A number of proficiency scales have been developed for adults learning English as a second language (e.g. the FSI Scales 1968; Ingram and Wylie 1984; Interagency Language Roundtable 1985). A short but valuable five-level scale for primary ESL learners is available from Britain (Hester in Barrs et al. 1988). A wide search found two short and unpublished Australian ESL scales in the school context (e.g. Grierson 1991; Metropolitan North Intensive Language Centre, Chatswood, n.d.), with no significant school-based ESL proficiency descriptions from overseas (see McKay 1992). The ESL Framework of Stages (McKay and Scarino 1991) provided a framework for the structure of the Bandscales.

The school context

Without doubt the major concern in the development of the ESL Bandscales was that the Bandscales address the development of ESL proficiency specifically within the school context. Although the available ESL scales for adults provided vital initial guidance, the writers were essentially starting from scratch as they tackled the issues around school-based ESL development.

What are the key implications of the school context for an ESL proficiency scale? In summary, a ESL scale should be able to take account of the following:

- That ESL learners in Australian schools range from around five years old to seventeen years old and over, and are at markedly different levels of social, emotional and cognitive development with markedly different experiences of the world.

- That ESL learners enter Australian schools at any phase of schooling and at any age, with a full range of experience in English (none or a little to advanced).

- That ESL learners bring with them a wide range of experiences in their first language and a range of educational experiences (in their first language and/or in English).

- That once in school, there are expectations for ESL learners to become increasingly and quickly competent, through English, in a broad range of knowledge, understandings, skills and attitudes related to everyday living in Australian society and to the school curriculum (the expectations varying and increasing as learners move from K–12).

- That ESL learners need to be able to become increasingly competent in academic language use of English in a range of subject areas (the characteristics of these expectations varying and increasing from K–12).

- That there are expectations and opportunities for ESL learners to enter into learning through mainstream subject areas often whilst they are still at early levels of English proficiency.

The school context is probably best described as a dynamic interrelationship of growth (maturation, language learning and mainstream learning) and pressures to grow, all in a new or second language, English.

Three strategies

The writers of the ESL Bandscales adopted three major strategies in order to construct the ESL Bandscales in a way which would take this context into account. These integrated strategies were:

- Adoption of a model of language ability able to account for the complexity of variables in the school context.
- Adoption of a three-tiered framework to account for the influence of age, experience and context on school learner second language development.
- The incorporation of descriptions of second language ability in academic contexts.

These strategies will be outlined in turn.

Strategy 1: Adoption of a model of language ability able to account for the complexity of variables in the school context

After careful consideration, the ESL Development Project chose to adopt as a theoretical base for the development of the ESL Bandscales (and the assessment and reporting materials) the Bachman (1990; 1991) and Bachman and Palmer (forthcoming) framework of communicative language ability. Whilst the project drew on other theories, it was felt that the Bachman/Palmer framework would be suitable as the theoretical basis for the project, since it was rich enough to conceptualise the issues involved in second language performance situations.

As part of their approach to language test development and use, Bachman and Palmer have developed a comprehensive and evolving framework of second language ability which provides a map rather than a prescription of language ability, setting out those areas of ability that need to be taken into account in second language assessment. It is a rich view of language which allows for a focus on both language use and the language user. Both sociolinguistic and

psycholinguistic issues are addressed. The relationship between language use and language test performance is shown in Figure 3a. The components of communicative language ability in the framework are set out in Figure 3b.

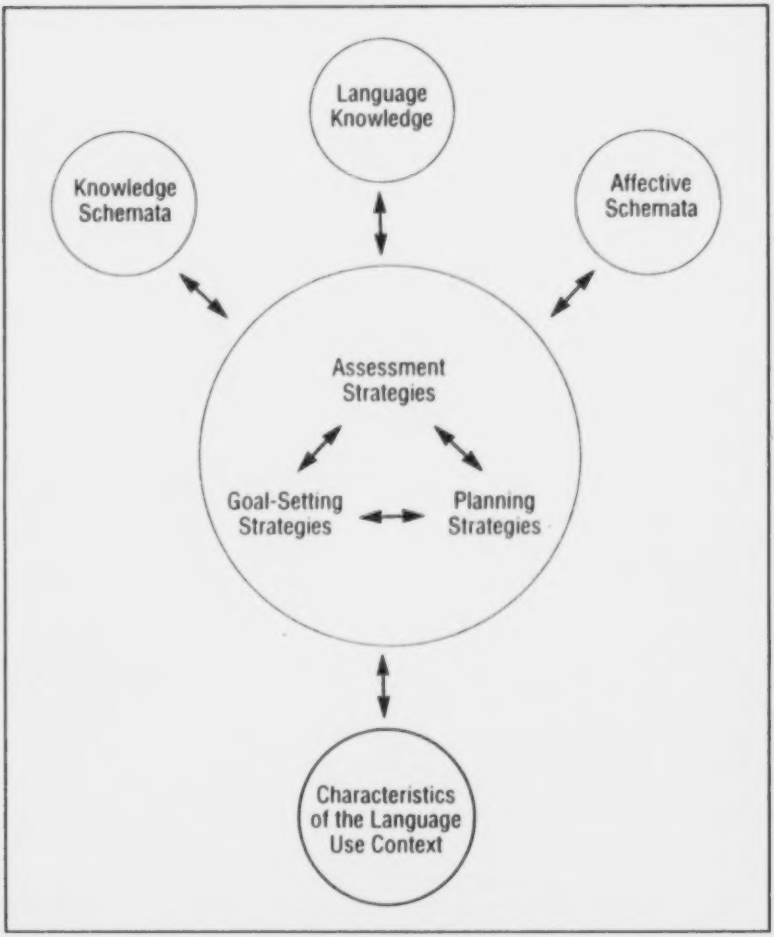

Figure 3a A model of language use (Bachman and Palmer, forthcoming)

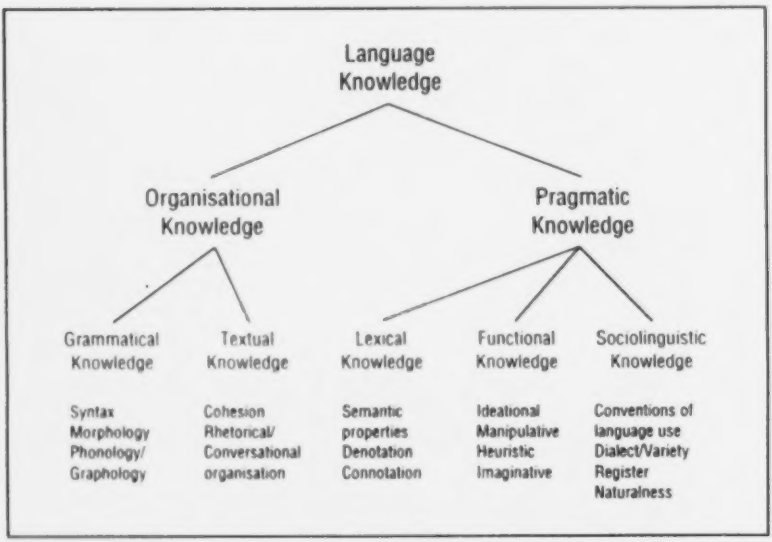

Figure 3b Areas of language knowledge (Bachman and Palmer, forthcoming)

The Bachman/Palmer framework is compatible with and draws on theories which provide information on more specifically-focused aspects and richer models of sociolinguistics (Bachman draws explicitly on the sociolinguistic theory of Halliday) and theories of second language acquisition and development. The writers of the ESL Bandscales needed to build the band descriptions on existing work in these areas, and on a current theory of language ability which enables the identification and classification of the many components of language which are considered relevant in language use. The Bachman/Palmer framework builds on the Canale and Swain (1980) framework and has widened considerably the construct that testers use for communicative competence. According to Skehan (1989:8), it is 'likely to have a considerable influence on language testing for some time to come'.

The framework as a whole examines and describes (1) the components of the language user's ability and (2) characteristics of the language use context. It was felt that both descriptions grasp the fundamental considerations of school ESL

teaching and learning and provide a comprehensive basis for the development of ESL Bandscales.

The value of the framework to the ESL Bandscales (as well as to other components of the project) is in its recognition and integration of the many facets of language performance (as well as language knowledge), including knowledge structures, the learner's sociocultural knowledge and 'real world' knowledge ('knowledge structures' incorporate school content knowledge), strategic knowledge which Bachman (1991:84) describes as the mental capacity for implementing the components of language competence in contextualised communicative language use, ('strategic knowledge' can also incorporate literacy strategies involved in reading and writing), affective factors (affective factors are recognised as being of vital importance in school ESL learning), psychophysiological mechanisms, and the context of situation. Bachman (1991:119) provides a detailed model of the context of situation through an analysis of testing conditions described in a most relevant way for school ESL, incorporating:

- facets of the testing environment (familiarity of the place and equipment, personnel, time of testing, physical conditions);
- facets of the test rubric (test organisation, time allocation, instructions);
- facets of the input (format; nature of language);
- facets of the expected response (format, nature of language, restrictions on response) and
- relationship between input and response (reciprocal, non-reciprocal, adaptive).

The Bachman and Palmer model was thus able to name, organise and account for in a comprehensive framework, the complex influences and considerations for the descriptions which were to be written for the ESL Bandscales.

Operationalising the constructs of language ability

The issues in operationalising constructs of language ability in proficiency scales are complex. A case has been put forward by Bachman (e.g. Bachman and

Savignon 1986; Bachman 1990) that a scale should be devoid of test method factors (that is, of factors in the context of situation), that a number of separate scales should be developed for each components of communicative language ability, and that the scale should be couched in terms of relative absence or presence of the component. A key underlying aim in this approach is to make the construct, the underlying ability of second language ability testable. However there are difficulties in this approach, just as in the scales Bachman criticises, not the least of which is rater understanding of and agreement on the descriptions (Brindley 1991:148). Such an approach was problematic for the writers, and for the purpose for which the Bandscales were to be used. Firstly, the Bachman model, together with the insights provided by Cummins (1991) on the differences between conversational and academic proficiency, were attractive to the school ESL experience not least because of the sociolinguistic emphasis, with the recognition of the role of content and context in language performance. Secondly, ratings of language ability were to be done through observations across a range of tasks (with assistance in selection and observation through focused tasks). Whilst the inclusion of context in the band descriptions may cause some difficulties with regard to the the testing of the constructs (Bachman 1990) (which can be addressed by using confirmatory factor analysis), decisions in the development of the ESL Bandscales were guided in the main by the assessor-oriented purposes of the Bandscales as opposed to the constructor-oriented purpose; that is by the fact that the Bandscales were developed in order to guide the rating process, rather than to guide the construction of tests at appropriate levels (Alderson 1991:73–4). A further influence on decisions was the underlying purpose of teacher professional development (awareness raising about the nature of second language development) which might occur in the reading and use of the Bandscales.

In effect, the NLLIA ESL Development Project has taken a 'weak' interpretation of the Bachman/Palmer framework, rather than the alternative interpretation of it as a 'God's truth' model of proficiency (Skehan 1991:15). The framework is used as a general guide, which is 'consistent with a wide range of theoretical insights, on the one hand, and which can be a systematising framework for research activity, on the other' (Skehan 1991:16). The literature on conversational/academic proficiency continuum, second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research, and genre theory, provided further information from within this framework.

In the band descriptions, knowledge schemata, the 'process dimension', areas of language knowledge, characteristics of the language use context, together with affective factors, are included where they are considered salient, that is where they are of value to the teachers in their rating of the student's proficiency level. Figure 4 shows the framework for the ordering of the descriptors used in the writing of each level of the ESL Bandscales. The various aspects of the Bachman/Palmer framework are summarised to guide the process of writing, and subsequently, the reading and use of the Bandscales.

GENERAL STATEMENT
(designed to provide an overview of the level and to describe global aspects of language use).
e.g., range of activities/texts, nature of the context e.g., nature of interlocutor support, whether face to-face/group/class, learner's familiariaty with content.

SKILLS/STRATEGIES AND FEATURES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION ('THE PROCESS DIMENSION') REFERRED TO IN THE BACHMAN MODEL
e.g. specific skill development in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening; descriptions of second language acquisition strategies, including role of L1.

FEATURES OF LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE
e.g., salient details of discourse features, vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation.

HIGHER LEVEL FEATURES OF PERFORMANCE
e.g., ways in which learners are dealing with cultural aspects within the language such as idiom.
e.g., level of precision.

NOTES ON THE LEVEL
e.g. notes on specific learner groups, implications for placement, appropriateness to purpose and context.

Figure 4 Framework for Ordering of Descriptors in ESL Bandscales (NLLIA ESL Development: Language and Literacy in Schools Volume I: Teachers' Manual, 1994: A19)

Figure 5 An example of an exemplar assessment activity

Target group: Junior Primary Middle Primary

Curriculum Area: Mathematics

Proficiency Level: Lower

Topic/Theme: Lego, Constructions

Assumed background knowledge/familiarity with task type*

1 Familiarity with Lego blocks
2 Some experience with the 'language' of building with Lego blocks
3 Experience working in pairs/ small groups

* If this knowledge and experience cannot be assumed for a particular student then this activity should probably **not** be used for assessing his/her ESL development.

Possible resources
in-built peer-/self-assessment

Description of the teaching cycle

		informal observation	planned observation	discussion	analysis of samples	peer-/self-assessment
	Small group with teacher:					
1	Decide on an object (e.g. truck) to be constructed with Lego blocks (from illustrations of Lego Information Leaflet — Grade 3/4 kit).					
2	Select main Lego pieces needed — introduce/reinforce names of pieces. Label illustration.					
3	Pair students — pairs and teacher construct object together. Teacher introduces relevant action verbs — put/press/find/make.	■				
4	Recount what was done — teacher/teacher and student.	■				
5	Teacher writes simple recount/cup up sentences.					
6	As a class/in pairs/students sequence sentences.	■	■	■	■	
7	Repeat above procedure with another object.					
8	**Planned assessment activity: Constructing and activity sharing.**		■			
9	Students write (1 sentence) telling what they did.		■	■	■	
10	Multi-age grouping: new arrivals students work with 1/2 students to help them construct some of the objects.	■	■			

Figure 5 Cont. An example of an exemplar assessment activity

Planned Assessment Activity: Constructing and activity sharing

Macro Skill(s): Listening Speaking

Description of Activity

- From illustrations, teacher selects a range of other objects that students may build (select illustrations with 'known' vocabulary).
- Pairs of students decide on an object to be constructed — construct it — prepare to tell another how it was constructed.
- Pairs combine and share how their item was constructed.

Suggested main aspects of language use to be assessed

- Familiarity with/understanding demands of task.
- Features of conversations with fellow student: text, language, task.
- Asking for/providing repetition, explanation, rephrasing.
- Fluency.
- Pronunciation/stress/intonation.
- Range of expression use (grammar and vocabulary).
- Use of tense.

Guidelines

Organisation (e.g. individual/pairs/groups; level of formality)

- Pairs of students to construct object and report to another pair.
- Teacher records language use — as students construct/as they prepare to share the activity/as they share with another pair (target students at different stages of the activity).

Constrains/conditions of activity (e.g. time allowed, drafting, editing, amount and type of teacher support, use of dictionary)

- Allow time as needed.
- Provide support as needed. (Note type of support provided in assessment records.)

Peer/self-assessment: possible approaches

- Pairs of students reflect on the activity.
- Identify own strengths and needs.

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The Bachman/Palmer framework in the exemplar assessment activities

The Bachman/Palmer framework provides a basis for the development of the assessment instruments within the project, and thus a unifying link between the ESL Bandscales and the assessment instruments. Figure 5 shows an example of an exemplar assessment activity[5]. The assessment activity is set within the context of a teaching cycle; teachers are alerted to the need to consider contextual factors such as assumed background knowledge, familiarity of the learner with the task type, and aspects of the text. Main aspects of language use to be assessed are noted, and observation is further supplemented by observation guides provided in the Teacher's Manual.

Strategy 2: Adoption of a three-tiered framework to account for the influence of age, experience and context on school learner second language development

In order to account for the influence of age, experience and changing context on the school learner's second language development, three ESL Bandscales were developed at three broad age groups or phases of schooling, as set out in Figure 6 below. This structure follows the conceptualisation of ESL learner development in the school context initially formulated in the ESL Framework of Stages (McKay and Scarmo 1991). Separate ESL Bandscales (each with four scales covering each of the macro-skills) were developed, at the junior primary phase of schooling, at the middle/upper primary phase and at the secondary phase. Each of the Bandscales is embedded within the context of the school for that age group, and describes language ability in levels gradually moving towards a high proficiency level defined by the characteristics of personal, social and general school use for that age group, and by the demands of the school context for that phase of schooling.

This strategy was successful in that it allowed the characteristics of the language users and their context to be highlighted in the descriptions. In particular, differences between features of early second language acquisition of young children compared with that of older learners could be described. The descriptions will assist teachers to recognise and rate the features of literacy and language development of the relevant group, taking into account the features and influences of literacy development and second language ability, and the nature of the school context for the age group in question. Extracts from the

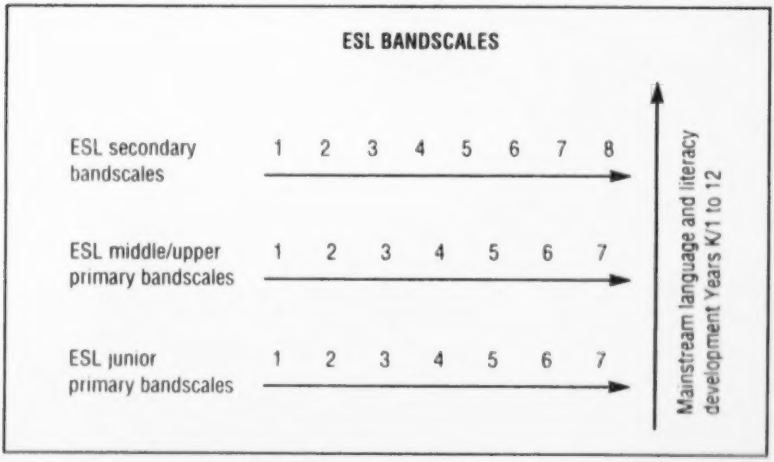
ESL BANDSCALES
ESL secondary bandscales
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
ESL middle/upper primary bandscales
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
ESL junior primary bandscales
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Mainstream language and literacy development Years K/1 to 12

Figure 6 The three ESL Bandscales and their relationship to mainstream language and literacy development, K–12

three Bandscales in Figure 7 give an indication of how the influence of developing literacy (in younger children), and second language literacy, and differences in the language and learning context are incorporated into the descriptions.

A disadvantage of adopting the three-tiered structure for the Bandscales is that there are many levels for teachers (and particularly administrators) to become acquainted with. The developers decided that in these initial descriptions, which were breaking new ground for others to follow it was better to err on the side of detail rather than to fall for a reductionist approach. The level of detail provided, in other words, was commensurate with the information needs of the audience. Alderson's (1991) distinction between assessor-oriented (where the purpose is to guide teacher observations and ratings) and user-oriented orientation (where the purpose is primarily a reporting one from the perspective of employers and others) is relevant here. As Alderson points out, problems arise when the functions of scales are confused. It was important to avoid this. Subsequent scales designed, for example, for administrative purposes, that is, with a user orientation, might simplify, using the NLLIA ESL Bandscale descriptions as a base reference.

Junior Primary Reading Level 2 (extract only)
Can recognise words and short word clusters in English if these have been recycled often in a variety of language activities. Are showing signs of becoming active readers, showing response to text (e.g. responding appropriately in the right places through laughter, surprise, disappointment). Are unable to fully comprehend and to predict meaning in text, even if they are able to decode.

Middle and Upper Primary Reading Level 2 (extract only)
Are showing signs of becoming active readers, showing response to text (e.g. responding appropriately in the right places...). Will join in with key words and repetitive phrases in familiar texts (e.g. picture stories, written chants and rhymes) in shared reading sessions...

Secondary Reading Level 2 (extracts only)
Language ability across a range of personal, social and general school contexts
Can comprehend short, high frequency written cues (e.g. written school signs such as directions and labels — *Return Books Here*; *Exit*; *Ticket Office*; *Library*; *Office*). Are able to read simple factual descriptions and informational texts which are contextually-enhanced (e.g. with pictures) and on familiar topics.

Application and extension to academic contexts
Can comprehend short recounts written by peers based on personal experiences... Can read a teacher-written simple procedure (e.g. simple written teacher instructions to follow to carry out a listening task such as using a tape recorder).

Figure 7 Extracts from Junior Primary, Middle and Upper Primary and Secondary Bandscales at Reading Level 2

Strategy 3: The incorporation of descriptions of language ability in academic contexts

Cummins' work on what he originally termed basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) with its later revisions (Cummins 1981, 1983, 1991) in which he referred to continua of context-dependent/context-independent and cognitively less demanding/cognitively-demanding language use was influential in the writers' approach to descriptions of language proficiency in the ESL Bandscales. Descriptions of learners' abilities to extend their language proficiency to academic contexts are

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integrated in the junior primary and middle/upper primary Bandscales, and are separate in the secondary Bandscales, where the language demands of academic contexts become more distant from social language contexts and are in even more need of close observation by teachers. Speaking Level 4 from the Middle/Upper Primary Bandscale Level 4 (Figure 8) shows how the primary Bandscale descriptions distinguish between social and academic contexts of language use, and how contextual support (e.g. modelling, scaffolding, recycling of language by the teacher, and reliance on written text for support), and low-level cognitive demands are features of learners' early proficiency in academic contexts.

Middle & Upper Primary ESL S4
Speaking: Level 4

Extending the range of language beyond own immediate social environment and experimenting with learning through English: drawing on knowledge of the world in L1 and English, and on L1 and English language and literacy (to varying degrees).

Are able to interact socially with peers and familiar adults in most informal school contexts (e.g. teacher on playground duty; with peers in playground games; with peers in the classroom in informal learning contexts (e.g. art and craft, games, organisational language in group work)). Can give personal information, and describe past and present events without great difficulty; able to use words and phrases in strings to participate in longer speaking turns.

Are able to recount an event or a series of events orally (e.g. in individual presentations such as morning news (for middle primary learners)).

Can participate in academic learning activities on familiar topics if teacher and contextual support (modelling, scaffolding, recycling of language etc.) and time are provided (e.g. can describe processes such as The Water Cycle in simple terms). ESL features still occur (see below) but will not generally impede overall meaning. Can give a short prepared formal spoken report with heavy word-for-word reliance on their written text and with little ability to respond to questions beyond giving yes/no answers.

Are attempting to express more complex ideas and more precision of meaning as their English resource grows. Attempts at explaining more complex ideas in English

Figure 8 Sample of a level description (Speaking Level 4) in the Middle/Upper Primary ESL Bandscales

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(e.g. explaining a problem they have in specific subject areas) may cause errors in syntax, with breakdown in meaning sometimes occurring.

May experience frustration as they realise the mismatch between English they can understand and the English they can speak. May wish to use L1 for emotional support and as a break from continual use of English.

Are producing more complex language (e.g. using subordinating conjunctions such as *because, when, that*). Are able to apply syntactic rules correctly (e.g. subject verb agreement, appropriate tense) but not consistently as they continue to make hypotheses and place more emphasis on getting their meaning across. Are showing signs of early modality (if...; could; might; will; must; perhaps) (e.g. *if I let it go they'll score me I'll go*. [Alfonso]).

SAMPLE

no my brother he told me he dream about when he gave me lots of cars and lots of things for boys like aeroplanes and robots and they say I was magic and I um take little ropes and I (packed/tacked?) everything with that rope and there came um little um cats was hairy and hair is to play with books and other things like this... (Aga).

Figure 8 Cont. Sample of a level description (Speaking Level 4) in the Middle/Upper Primary ESL Bandscales

In the secondary ESL Bandscales, two headings are provided in each level description, namely (1) Language ability in personal, social and general school contexts ('social contexts') and (2) Extension to academic contexts. The first heading introduces a description of language use outside specific academic contexts; the second extends this ability into academic contexts (see Figure 9). It is important to note that the second is intended as an extension of the first and not a separate description. However as the Bandscales levels took shape it was discovered (and confirmed through teacher consultation) that the language proficiency in academic contexts might sometimes be a 'maverick' extension from earlier levels (where the learner has been able to draw on his depth of specific subject knowledge, and his strategic competence — including study skills — to reach a higher level of academic language ability in a chosen subject area). The academic extension may also be a 'fallback' from more advanced levels of language ability in social contexts. Because of differential development

in social and academic contexts such as this, the reporting formats allow for ratings (with accompanying comments) in (1) personal/social and general school contexts and (2) academic contexts, at the secondary level. A sample of a secondary ESL Bandscale description is provided in Figure 9.

In the junior and middle/upper primary ESL Bandscales, headings defining language ability in social and academic contexts were not used, though the continuum provided an underlying framework for level descriptions, particularly in the middle/upper primary Bandscales, and particularly in upper levels of proficiency.

Understandings about language ability in specific academic contexts are still developing in the school ESL field. Further research is needed and hopefully will come out of these first descriptions. In particular, little is known about the characteristics of the development of the academic language proficiency of low literacy-background learners. Within the ESL Bandscales specific characteristics of the proficiency of learners with a low-literacy background were provided in note-form within the level descriptions, otherwise low literacy background learners were presumed to be included through the existing descriptions (that is, most likely being rated at lower levels because of the effects of their low-literacy background). However, it is known that the picture is more complex than this. The writers recommend that research into this aspect of school ESL be conducted urgently.

Validation of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales

Although further validation is needed (and this is, it is hoped, to be addressed through further funding from the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training), the ESL Bandscales derive their initial validity from a range of sources.

A number of studies (e.g. Ingram 1985; Dandonoli and Henning 1990) have investigated the construct validity (the establishment of the theoretical and psychological reality of the constructs) of 'real-life' (Bachman 1990) proficiency scales. It is generally recognised that there are a number of issues involved in the construct validity of proficiency scales in this tradition (e.g. Bachman and Savignon 1986; Brindley and Nunan 1992:24–7). Brindley and Nunan (1992:24)

Secondary ESL R5
Reading: Level 5

Transition towards successful learning through English. Beginning consolidation of understanding of the demands of the educational context: drawing on L2 and L2 literacy (to varying degrees) and knowledge of the world in L1 and L2

LANGUAGE ABILITY ACROSS A RANGE OF PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND GENERAL SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Can comprehend a wide range of authentic non-technical factual texts that are not culturally overladen (e.g. school newsletter, popular newspaper articles, information on careers). Are markedly more able to comprehend above texts when topic is familiar. Can get the gist of more complex and abstract texts (within the range of ability expected at their phase of schooling) such as technical/analytical texts on unfamiliar topics (e.g. articles in *Bulletin, Time, Australian Geographic* magazines).

Will have difficulty with very lengthy texts (unable to follow and hold meaning throughout) and will tend to avoid them (e.g. long novels, long feature articles in magazines).

Will need to read at own pace and may need time to re-read.

Will make wide use of a bilingual dictionary or an English/English dictionary as a strategy to check guesses in comprehension of meaning from the above texts.

Are developing a wide general reading vocabulary, which gives a base for reading of general authentic reading texts.

Even in straight-forward texts will have difficulty drawing inferences directly from specific linguistic features of the text to discern author's point of view and intent (e.g. foregrounding of information to signify writer's emphasis; ordering and use of selected phrases which signify the writer's position [e.g. *after all, she was only* ...]; word choice [e.g. *hostility* rather than *dislike*]).

Can read many types of handwriting, such as those by peers and teachers.

APPLICATION AND EXTENSION TO ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

Are able to comprehend some textbook materials on context-enhanced (e.g. supporting pictures) and not highly abstract topics in subject areas. Are usually able to locate main ideas and details and predict meaning in these texts based on linguistic context and background knowledge. Are able to get the gist and main subsidiary ideas in specialist texts (at the level of, and within the range of ability of, their phase of schooling) in those subject areas in which they have strong background in their L1 and/or L2 studies (e.g. Maths, Physics).

May be able to comprehend technical words more easily than sub-technical words (e.g. words like *work, plant, feed, force* which have a range of meaning and are often used idiomatically; or words like *extends, negligible* associated with scientific phraseology). Will have a broad technical vocabulary which has not yet been consolidated and lacks depth due to swift change of topics across subject areas.

With additional ESL-informed support:

With support (accessing the text, use of bilingual dictionary, with additional time etc.) can skim, scan, get the gist, and repeat the content of extended informational, persuasive school texts, and short stories (which are not too reliant on cultural content). With support can cope with changes in genres within a text (e.g. historical recount to narrative in an Australian history textbook).

Figure 9 Sample of a level description (Reading Level 5) in the Secondary ESL Bandscales

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Need a great deal of support with higher levels of reading (e.g. to infer the intentions and point of view of the author; to follow the chain of logical conjunctions in a text; to recognise the relevance and appropriateness of evidence and supporting details)

Even with simple task instructions/assignment questions, need support to determine appropriate response (e.g. choice of text-types) and to recognise and interpret key words which require detailed response (e.g. compare/contrast texts; *from your observations and your reading* requires a response to **both** key words)

Learners may take a long time to move from Level 4 to Level 5; they may appear to regress because of the increased demands of more complex and lengthy texts, to the sheer quantity from various subjects, and lack of time to read these in depth and assimilate new language due to swift change of topics which do not systematically build on each other in terms of language. A change in the level of support available of an ESL specialist may also be a factor.

Note: Level 5 — A 'plateau' level for some. Level 5 language, particularly in academic contexts, presents difficulties for many ESL learners. It becomes a 'plateau' level for a number of ESL learners ('plateau learners'), especially those without a solid grounding of content knowledge, or with interruptions in their L1 language and literacy development. Many learners (often from Group B [*low literacy background learners*] and Group C learners [*learners transferring from primary school*], who may be unnoticed because of their apparent ease in personal, social and general school contexts, find it hard to move beyond Level 5, yet further progress is essential for more sophisticated 'general' language use and for success in senior secondary study.

Note: Senior Secondary Group A (L1 school literacy background learners) *(including Year 10).* Some learners ('academically-focused' learners) are able to operate with more success in academic contexts than in personal, social and general school contexts because of their informed decision to focus on specific subjects for success (e.g. maths, science), their learning-how-to-learn skills and L1 educational background which is sometimes above that of native speaker peers in chosen subject areas. These learners will concentrate on becoming proficient readers of subject-specific registers and/or teacher–pupil language. These learners are highly motivated and are using a high level of strategic competence in L2.

Note: The extension of the *With Support* description at Level 5 reflects an inevitable increase in complex task demands on most ESL learners as they participate in mainstream learning contexts and in which ESL teachers are no longer able to select and filter activities and written texts to suit the reading level in English. Although ESL learners benefit from learning in more complex environments, learners are increasingly attempting reading tasks which they are unable to carry out independently due to their level of reading.

SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS FOR PLACEMENT

Learners at this level will have some chance to succeed in the mainstream context (particularly junior secondary) if they are provided with ESL support and have the necessary background knowledge.

Initial teacher reaction would indicate that there are many learners who are still at Level 5 Reading in senior secondary school; such learners would have great difficulty dealing with the demands of senior secondary school level, even with support. Learners at this level are tending to develop 'horizontally' i.e. increasing their experience of English across a wider range of purposed, audiences and contexts. Learners may stay at Level 5 for an extended length of time as they develop in this way.

Figure 9 Cont. Sample of a level description (Reading Level 5) in the Secondary ESL Bandscales

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comment, for example, that there has been no real empirical support or established sets of principles for the construction of existing proficiency scales, nor for the multi-level bandscales which imply linear sequence. With regard to the development of the IELTS Draft listening scale, Brindley and Nunan (1992:24) write:

> *It is more likely, given what is known about the organic nature of language learning, that development... happens slowly and gradually such that a learner at any one point in time may well display evidence of behaviours which are characteristic of more than one ability level. While the concept of 'band' rather than possible 'levels' or 'point' addresses this problem to a certain extent since it covers 'ranges of possible scores, rather than precisely defined, invariable performances' (Alderson 1991:73), the measurement aspect of listening assessment can only be vitiated by the inevitable lack of precision of scale points.*

The use of vague and impressionistic terms ('frequent', 'many', 'some', 'a few') used to distinguish between the number of bands describing ability levels leads to subjective interpretation which is problematic (Brindley and Nunan 1992:24).

Construct validity in the ESL Bandscales is being addressed, though currently on a small scale because of funding constraints, through the analysis of teacher ratings of groups of students in primary and secondary schools. An initial investigation of how the secondary scale is operating has been undertaken, using Rasch modelling (Lee et al., in preparation). Four teachers' rated twenty-two students on each of the four skills, with each student rated by two teachers. An initial analysis has shown that the secondary ESL Bandscales operate in a true partial credit fashion in the teacher ratings. The spacing of the lower steps appeared to be comparatively closer than the higher levels, which bears out the conception of the scales by the writers. These results have been obtained without teacher (rater) training, and with three of the participating teachers being mainstream subject teachers. This result is encouraging. Further analysis is being undertaken, and ratings are currently being collected from junior primary and primary teachers using the relevant ESL Bandscales. Partial credit analysis (Wright and Masters 1982) provides a means for the empirical validation of rating scales. The Partial Credit Model can also be used to investigate the validity of the rating categories themselves and their relationship of the categories to the construct being measured, for example, whether some

indicators (e.g. those related to accuracy) might have a disproportionate role in the ratings of performance (McNamara and Adams 1991).

Content and face validity in the ESL Bandscales have been established as far as possible through the fact that the ESL Bandscales are constructed by experienced and expert writers, in consultation with many experienced teachers who reacted according to their experience and their observations of learners' language performance in schools. The limitations of reliance on teacher observations, in that teachers' observations may be limited by a lack of knowledge of theoretical models, by inadequate observations skills and/or an inability to articulate descriptions of independent student language behaviour (Griffin and McKay 1992) are, however, recognised. The strong input from the specialist writing team, the coordination of teacher input, the close and ongoing contact between teachers and the team, was designed to counteract this effect as far as possible.

To ascertain content and face validity, a classroom-based survey of draft versions of the ESL Bandscales was carried out during the development of the Bandscales. The structure and content of the drafts were by this time close to the final ESL Bandscales, though feedback from teachers gave direction to a final refinement process before publication. Responses from teachers were extremely positive. Ninety per cent of teachers, many of whom had observed and rated learners with the draft Bandscales, rated the scales as either 'sufficiently representative' or 'highly representative' of ESL learner language development in school.

Ultimately, the content and face validity of the ESL Bandscales were considered to be high because of the nature of the developmental process, which was an iterative and wide process of consultation involving extensive input from practitioners and other specialists. Davies (1988:47–8) argues for content validity over statistical analyses of validity, because of the 'elusiveness of precision in language testing'.

> *Language testing needs to be about integrated pragmatic systems: the major skills we bring as testers must be linguistic-descriptive, the statistical analyses must always be ancillary and secondary.*

This view has been relevant to the development of the ESL Bandscales, and also supports the view held by the writing team that content validity plays a major role in the validation of the Bandscales.

Issues of implementation

The NLLIA ESL Bandscales are part of an integrated package of ESL assessment which, because of the wide consultation and involvement of teachers of ESL learners in schools which occurred during its development, has already had a major impact in the school ESL field in Australia. Professional development (rater training) will accompany trialling, and should certainly accompany further use of the materials. Some professional development activities have already taken place since the completion of the project. Further research arising from the ESL Bandscales and the ESL Project is inevitable, since many new questions have arisen out of the first major steps taken by the project team.

Two key areas for research relate to the proficiency development of low-literacy background learners, and of Aboriginal learners learning English as a 'foreign language' (e.g. in bush settings) or as a second dialect. It was not clear, for example, whether low-literacy background learners follow the same pathway of second language development as learners who have developed literacy in their first language but at a slower rate, or whether they 'hop across' the bands, taking with them large gaps in their language and conceptual development due to missed or partly-developed concepts and language skills in their earlier education. There is also a need to undertake research into the English language development of Aboriginal learners, whether as a second language or second dialect, taking into account particular features of language development due to particular cultural and contextual differences. Since the writers were careful to include the context as a major characteristic of the ESL Bandscale descriptions, it was inappropriate not to acknowledge that cultural and contextual differences would be evident in the case of Aboriginal learners. The ESL Bandscales can provide a base for further research and development in the field of Aboriginal education, which clearly needs to occur in close consultation with specialists and practitioners.

Ultimately, educational politics tied to the continuing development of state and national profiles, will determine the extent to which the ESL Bandscales and ESL Project materials will be adopted system-wide in Australian schools. Meanwhile, teacher-initiated use is occurring across Australia. In terms of research and development, the creative first step in the development of comprehensive, theory- and research-driven second language proficiency

descriptions for school age learners has been taken. The ESL Bandscales will hopefully, as part of the total assessment and reporting package developed through the project, provide an impetus for more research into informed assessment and reporting of the language progress of ESL learners in school, and make a key contribution to the education of ESL learners in Australian schools.

Notes

1 The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.

2 The Project was funded from the national element of the Australian Second Language Learning Program of the National Policy on Languages; the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, the NLLIA and the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). The Project was carried out through the NLLIA Language Testing and Curriculum Centre at Griffith University, the NLLIA Language Testing Centre, Melbourne University and the NLLIA Language Acquisition Research Centre at Sydney University. The publications of the NLLIA ESL Development: Language and Literacy in Schools project (Volumes I and II) are available through the NLLIA, 6 Campion Street, Deakin, ACT 2600.

3 The writer wishes to fully acknowledge the contribution of Catherine Hudson and Marilyn Sapuppo for their major contribution to the development of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales.

4 The Catholic Education Office of Victoria are thanked for their contribution to the development of the ongoing reporting and Summary ESL Profile Report formats and guidelines within the Project.

5 A full introduction to and rationale for the exemplar assessment activities can be found in the NLLIA ESL Development: Language and Literacy in Schools Teacher's Manual (Volume I).

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